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Testimonial to Right to Be Neutral

Burma Gets Military Aid Unannounced

By Warren Unna
Staff Reporter

The United States has been aiding neutral Burma with a "military sales program" for the past three years.

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The unannounced assistance is at Burma's own request. Equipment is being sold to Burma at a very small fraction of cost, and payment is being accepted in Burmese kyats, rather than in hard-currency dollars.

The U. S. equipment sold to the Burmese to help maintain their own security—external as well as internal—has been described as "a miscellaneous bag" that includes tanks, arms, ammunition and helicopters.

In recent interviews with Burmese and American officials in Rangoon, I was told the rate of delivered equipment is "about double" the $3 million a year the United States spends on its Burmese economic aid program.

The Burmese army, which has not drawn down all the equipment offered, carefully specified when the "sales program" began that the United States not send along the usual Military Advisory Group. Instead, a small U. S. "delivery team" is on the spot in Burma with no responsibility other than to teach the Burmese how to use and maintain the equipment.

The existence of this "military sales program" suggests a fascinating quadrille in international politics:

• The Burmese, with one step, seek and maintain this arrangement while sharing a 1250-mile border with Communist China, which regards the United States as her No. 1 enemy.

• With the other step, Burmese Premier U Nu recently has undertaken an exchange of good-will "visits" with Chinese Premier Chou En-lai, which has culminated in the settlement of the long-undefined China-Burmese border and the acceptance of an 84-million-dollar interest-free Chinese loan package to further Burmese development.

• For its part, the United States, with one step, is granting military assistance to a neutral nation without announcing it, as thorough going a testimonial to the right of a nation to be neutral as the United States has ever made.

• With the other step the United States, in February found itself being accused for the second time in nine years of committing a grossly unfriendly act: "Permitting" the Nationalist Chinese on Formosa to airdrop U. S. arms from U. S. planes to an outlaw group of Nationalist Chinese (KMT) soldiers holed up in Burma's rebellious Shan State.

Reports of the U. S. Central Intelligence Agency's role in the Formosa-KMT troop-supply line became so notorious in 1952 that Burma temporarily canceled her U. S. economic aid program and the U. S. Ambassador at the time, David McK. Key, resigned in protest.

Formosa's purpose in maintaining the KMT troops undoubtedly has been to harass the Communist mainland from its southern border, a source of acute embarrassment to neighbor Burma. And the embarrassment became even worse recently when a new supply airstrip was discovered within Burma's own territory.

U. S. Ambassador William P. Snow wired the State Department in December, warning them that if the KMT action wasn't stopped, there would be trouble.

The warning went ignored, and in February, after a Burmese plane had been shot down while pursuing Nationalist supply planes and a cache of U. S. arms and ammunition had been captured, the U. S. Embassy in Rangoon was stormed.

Secretary of State Dean Rusk, furious that the same KMT problem that had beset him as Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs under the Truman Administration was still unsolved, cracked down. The toughest U. S. message to Chiang Kai-shek in local memory was quickly dispatched to Formosa, and the quickest compliance in memory followed.

But the Burmese still suspect that a good many of the KMT are still around, some in Burma, and some temporarily exiled in commuter range in nearby Laos and Thailand.

Ten days ago in Geneva, Burmese Foreign Minister Sao Hkun Hkio complained to Rusk. "Past experience warns us that these marauders, unless withdrawn from Laos, are likely to infiltrate into Burmese territory again while we are engaged in mopping up the small numbers still remaining on our soil," Hkio told reporters.

But the KMT sore spot has not affected the U. S. "military sales program." On the contrary, there also have been a few Burmese steps that the Americans have not liked.

The U. S. obligingly took the Burmese hint and moved its civilian-dressed "delivery team" southward during the recent China-Burmese demarcation of the joint border.

But the United States was annoyed to find that the Communist Chinese soldiers were not entering Burmese territory simply to help demarcate, but also to do a little maneuvering in the direction of the KMT pockets, a good deal farther south, to help in weeding out the KMT troops.

Are the Communist Chinese aware of the U. S. "military sales program"?

The Burmese say the Chinese "probably" are, even though they have never voiced a complaint.

Why then has Peking been so complacent?

In Burma, some speculate that the Rangoon airport and harbor are a great asset to China as they are: outside access from the Bay of Bengal. There China's visitors and cargo can come and go without being watched and counted by either the British in Hong Kong or the Russians at Soviet Union waypoints on Chinese routes to Europe.

There also is the speculation that Peking knows U. S. military aid to Burma will never be of such a size as to constitute an external threat to the Chinese border.

And here in Washington there are some who suspect that China is as anxious as the United States to keep Burma just as she is, a neutral nation not aligned, but friendly to both East and West.

For Peking, having Burma as a showcase example of peaceful coexistence is better than having Burma join the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, what the U. S. once hoped would happen.

For the United States, having Burma neutral is better than having Burma get into any closer relationship with China. If Burma were to move at all, this is probably the direction [illegible] interest would take her in today's shaky Southeast Asia world.

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